

Roy Poulter – amateur furniture maker in the Cotswolds arts and crafts tradition

My father Roy Poulter (Fig 1) died in 2003 at the age of 84. By instinct he was a cabinet maker but for nearly 40 years he worked as a civil servant. The furniture he made in the Cotswolds tradition was his delight, and I have inherited three of his pieces. As someone with a passion for the arts and crafts movement, I often see in auction catalogues furniture listed as 'by an unknown maker in the Cotswolds style'. This note in my father's memory is intended to record the background of someone who must have been just one of many amateur craftsmen who have now died and whose works have passed anonymously into the antiques trade.

My father was born in Burley in the New Forest in 1918. His father died when he was a few months old and he was brought up by his mother. In 1932 at the age of 14 he left school and managed to get himself accepted as a cabinet maker's apprentice in Portsmouth Dockyard, a relatively short distance from Burley. He was only in the dockyard for a little over a year but the skills he learnt made a lasting impression on him. In 1933 he passed the exam to join the civil service and this took him to London, a secure job, nearly 60 years of happy marriage to my mother and a comfortable life, yet he always felt that he had been (to misquote Leonard Cohen) sentenced to 40 years of professional boredom. He made the furniture illustrated as a hobby between about 1939 and 1951, initially working in a garden shed in Streatham, South London.



Fig 3.

His first project was the small side table shown in Fig 2, made in about 1939 from English oak. Good timber was not easy to find and he scavenged what he could from friends in the New Forest. Like all his furniture, it is stained with raw linseed oil. The bobbin legs were turned by someone he knew in Clapham. The design and proportions are clearly based on 18th century oak side tables.

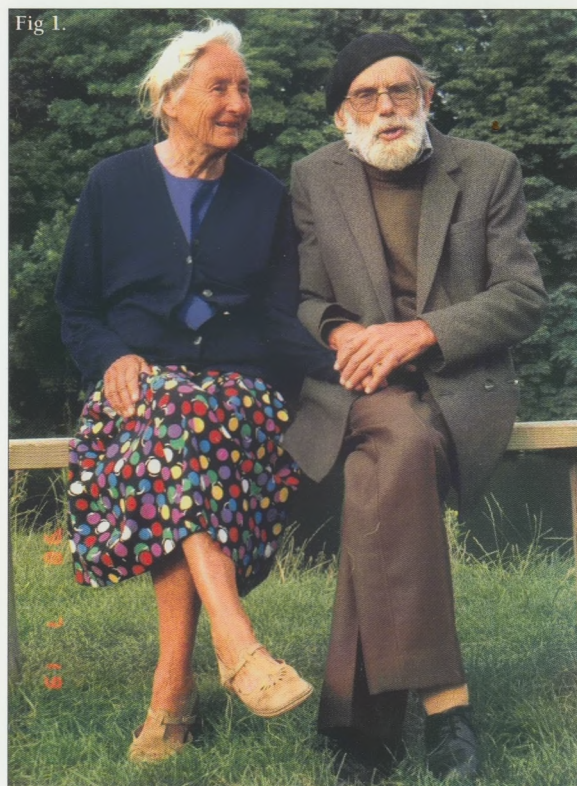


Fig 1.

Fig 1. Roy Poulter and his wife, Betty
Fig 2. Small side table
Fig 3. Oak cabinet



Fig 2.



Fig 4. Extending dining table

The side cabinet (Fig 3) was made about the same time and is much more typical of arts and crafts proportions. The top is chestnut and the rest English oak. I am not certain where he got the ideas for his designs but he always spoke positively about Heals and I believe he used to visit the store in Tottenham Court Road armed with tape measure and note book.

By now it was the height of World War 2 and he worked 12-hour shifts in the war registry deep under Whitehall. I am sure that cabinet making in the garden shed was his way of escaping from the reality of the outside world. Between the more major projects he made other things. He used to cycle from Streatham to central London to get to work and one day he came across an acacia tree that had fallen across the road. Never one to miss out on a supply of wood, he managed to beg a chunk which he carved into the two bowls shown in Fig 2, using chisels and gouges.

The extending dining table made around 1949-50 shown in Fig 4 is very much in the Gordon Russell or Heals tradition. Serious supplies of wood were required for this project and my father's uncle, who worked for the Forestry Commission, suggested a wood merchant in Horsham. Initially the request for English oak was met with a polite refusal, but on hearing that his uncle had sent him, the response changed and shortly afterwards his supplies of wood were duly dispatched by train. In 1950 my father moved to Croydon and the table was finished in the garage of his new semi-detached house. The quality of the workmanship is high, and each end of the main table top is cross clamped to minimise warping.

My children have instructions - when the time comes - to sell my (many) other collections but not to let their grandfather's tables end up in an auction house as oak furniture by an unknown maker in the Cotswolds style!

Guy Poulter